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Business

### **Lawyer Praised for Raising the Bar on Donations**

Robert Lalley appealed to area lawyers to give more time and money to the poor. This year, they gave more than a half million dollars to Western Michigan Legal Services.

Hank Bornheimer / The Grand Rapids Press

Grand Rapids lawyer Robert Lalley Jr. has never been poor.

His middle-class upbringing in the '50s and '60s produced a comfortable, secure childhood. The third of seven kids of an FBI agent and a full-time homemaker, he was educated at Catholic Central High School and Central Michigan University and had a promising career, with a law degree from the University of North Carolina.

He has practiced law 28 years now, and he makes a good living.

But Lalley knows the poor.

Like many local lawyers, he has donated many hours of free legal help over the years. But it was his influence on members of the Grand Rapids Bar Association to increase their financial and legal support for the poor that earned Lalley kudos for saving Western Michigan Legal Services (WMLS) from near collapse.

Western Michigan Legal Services formerly known as the non-profit Legal Aid, honored Lalley recently with the 10th annual Michael S. Barnes Award for "outstanding service to the low-income community." Lawyers call it "pro bono" work, a Latin phrase meaning, "For the public good."

In praising Lalley, WMLS director Michael Chielens said, "Pro bono lawyers perform a necessary service to society by increasing access to justice for all people, not just those who have the wealth."

A co-founder and partner of Verspoor, Waalkes and Lalley, a small law firm in the Trust Building downtown, Lalley, 53, said, he doesn't

regard his own public service as anything special. "It just levels the playing field for them," he said. "They're just cases of people who need help, but have no idea where to turn. It's not always for legal issues."

It was the day after the ceremony and, modesty aside, he was feeling pleased about the award.

"It's nice to receive, knowing what kind of lawyer Mike Barnes was. The previous winners were all quality people."

The late Michael Barnes, a corporate lawyer, and the legendary John Cummiskey, a labor lawyer on management's side, are two of Lalley's heroes. Both Grand Rapids attorneys also were well known in the local and state legal circle for their heart and hard work for the poor.

While he was president of the Grand Rapids Bar Association in 1995-96, Lalley decided to make legal services to the poor a top priority.

Congress, led by Newt Gingrich, had cut federal funding for such services across the board. Grand Rapids suffered a one-third reduction.

Lalley remembers calling a meeting of managing partners of all the big law firms in town to deal with the cutback. He appealed to them to get their lawyers to restore the loss out of their own pockets. He also asked that local lawyers double the time they gave to the poor.

The Michigan Bar Association guidelines encouraged but never mandated 30 hours a year per lawyer.

"I simply told them we needed funds, or Legal Aid would have been gutted," Lalley remembers of that meeting. "I asked for \$300 per lawyer to make up for the shortfall. Just about everyone came through, and they're still doing it."

This year, the bar gave more than a half million dollars in time and money to WMLS, said Paul Abrahamsen, pro bono coordinator for the organization.

Lalley also is enthused about other bar efforts on behalf of the poor, most notably the Legal Assistance Center will operate out of the new courthouse. Lalley said the center will be staffed by Western Michigan Legal Services and a rotation of volunteers from the bar. The center, spearheaded by local attorney Jon Muth, appears to be

unique to Grand Rapids, Lalley said.

"The bar raised over a million dollars to fund the office." The American Bar Association awarded a \$6,000 grant for the model project.

Lalley has a general law practice, handling most cases, from family matters to liability lawsuits.

"I like the variety. There always will be a need for an attorney to do general law. I probably could still pass the (state) bar exam," he says, somewhat in jest, because of all the different areas of the law still very familiar to him.

Lalley, Carl Verspoor and Thomas Waalkes have been law partners since 1983, and together since 1974 when they were beginning lawyers with another firm. "We've always gotten along," says Lalley.

He spent his first year out of law school as a law clerk for the Michigan Court of Appeals in Grand Rapids. The job was typically low-paying. He and his schoolteacher wife, Linda, probably didn't know they were starting out on the poor side. They got married after his first year of law school.

The Appeals court job changed their plans to settle in Lansing, halfway between here and Saginaw, where she grew up.

He still gives time to the bar association, serving on the Pro Bono Committee. "Old (bar) president should fade away."

Lalley praises the lawyers working for Western Michigan, Legal Services. "They are the ones who are really dedicated to helping the poor."

Of his own contribution to the poor, Lalley sums it up this way: "I managed to shut down a few crises in their lives."